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Change at the Top in CIA

In a manner that keeps faith with its secret character, the Central Intelligence Agency will change directors in November while the public continues guessing about changes in its role. But we can guess with assurance that the role will remain vitally important. President Kennedy indicated as much when he chose a gathering of high military men at the Naval War College in Newport, R. I., as the forum for his announcement that John A. McCone will succeed Allen W. Dulles as head of the CIA later this fall. The appointment itself is another indication.

Mr. McCone's service as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission under President Eisenhower has given him experience in dealing with the Pentagon, the White House, the National Security Council, and the Congress in military matters involving nuclear weapons and requiring a high degree of secrecy. The military aspects of atomic energy doubtless also placed Mr. McCone in contact with the CIA. His new milieu will be the same combination of agencies, presumably with Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, the President's military adviser, as a primary go-between.

The future of the CIA's function is another matter. After the Cuban invasion failure in April, for which heavy blame fell on the intelligence agency, a high-level review of CIA operations was initiated by the President. The findings went to him, and what leaked out has not been substantiated by official announcement.

The most persistent reports held that planning and executing of operations

—such as the Cuban invasion—would be shifted to the Pentagon, while the CIA remained the chief evaluator of foreign intelligence, whose gathering it would continue to share with the intelligence units of the armed services.

The purpose of this arrangement would be to remove the temptation of tailoring data to fit a predetermined plan. Whether this condition actually has occurred is unclear, but the Cuban affair raised the argument that it could. Also raised was the older argument for a watchdog committee of congressmen or administration officials who would be bound to secrecy but serve as monitor of the CIA. Gen. Taylor now is understood to fill this capacity.

President Kennedy used meticulous care in his handling of the post-Cuba CIA affair. Through the uproar, which incidentally never established conclusively the extent of the CIA's responsibility, he invoked Mr. Dulles' agreement to remain in the post this year although the director offered to resign. His praise of Mr. Dulles this week must be taken as considered judgment, for the President is one of the few who can judge the effectiveness of the agency.

Mr. McCone moves into a similar situation, whether the CIA's mission is altered or not. It is the situation of a secret agency in an open society competing with a cold-war rival whose entire operation is largely secret. It is a situation in which we can only wish good luck. But we can note that the President has picked a man of proven dedication, without regard for political allegiance.